

# Rating the Debates: The 2010 UK Party Leaders' Debates and Political Communication in the Deliberative System

## Abstract

Leader debates have become a pre-eminent means of campaign communication in numerous countries and were introduced in the UK relatively recently. However, the quality of such communication is, to put it mildly, open to question. This article uses the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) to assess the deliberative quality of the 2010 UK party leaders' debates. When scrutinized in isolation, and viewed through the full prism of the DQI categories, the quality of discourse evidenced in the debates is a relatively poor reflection of mainstream idealizations of democratic deliberation. However, when the analysis is rehoused within the wider project of constructing a deliberative *system* in the UK, and is given a comparative institutional dimension, the epistemic value of the debates is revealed. The relatively high level of justification employed by the party leaders suggests that the debates are a valuable means for the mass communication of reasoned defenses of manifesto pledges to the public sphere, and that they are likely to have a significant educative effect. Moreover, we argue that sequencing such debates with representative deliberative fora will force elites to improve the deliberative quality of their communication and enhance the reflective capacity of the viewing public.

**Keywords:** Deliberative democracy; deliberation; party leaders' debates; political communication

## Introduction

The British political landscape rarely changes in dramatic fashion. This tradition explains why the introduction of three leaders' debates into the 2010 UK general election campaign piqued the interest of politicians, commentators and academics alike. Ben Macintyre, writing in *The Times*, referred to the first debate as 'a crucial punctuation mark in this election, but also a milestone in history. British politics will never be the same' (Macintyre, 2010). Chadwick adopts a similar tone when describing the introduction of the debates as 'the most important single development in the British media's treatment of politics since the arrival of television' (Chadwick, 2011, p.24). The debates certainly garnered massive viewing figures and, when the Liberal Democrats surged in the polls following their leader's perceived victory in the first debate, the electoral potential of the debates looked clear. Even if that surge eventually failed to translate into a significant increase in parliamentary seats, the debates remained the dominant feature of the 2010 campaign – and the long squabbles over the format of the 2015 debates reinforces their perceived electoral importance.

We therefore agree with Shephard and Johns (2012, p.15) that, 'given the centrality of the debates to the dynamics of the 2010 campaign (and, albeit less directly than anticipated, to the eventual outcome), they warrant closer scrutiny'. This article scrutinizes the debates in a very specific manner. Our aim is to evaluate the leaders' debates through the lens of deliberative democracy. More specifically, we aim to measure the 'deliberativeness' of the discourse employed during the debates and to comment on the role leaders' debates may fulfil as part of a wider deliberative system in the UK.

There are differing anecdotal impressions of the British leader debates' deliberative credentials. During the 2010 and 2015 campaigns, various commentators expressed concerns and were therefore sceptical about the debates' contribution to the democratic process. The

main criticisms were that the debates promoted ‘style over substance’ (see Freedland, 2010; Marqusee, 2010; Waweru, 2010); that their novelty, in the words of the outgoing and incoming Prime Ministers respectively, ‘clouded the need for policy to be debated’ (Watt, 2010) and ‘sucked the life’ out of the election campaign (LUCRC, 2015); and that ultimately ‘as Socratic dialogues aimed at uncovering the truth the debates were, almost inevitably, failures’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2011, p.150). These appraisals echo criticisms leveled at the use of the televised debate in the USA, where it is an established feature of the campaign landscape (see, *inter alia*, Auer, 1962; Bitzer and Router, 1980; Lanoue and Schrott, 1991).

If true, this would seriously undermine one of the main justifications for such debates, which is that their educative effect will improve the quality of democratic decision making (Holbrook, 1999). Yet these criticisms stand in stark contrast to the evaluation of Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2010) who argued that post-debate poll fluctuations – which were a feature of both 2010 and 2015 elections – illustrated the manner in which ‘deliberation makes a difference’, as each debate ‘precipitated a national conversation that encouraged many voters to re-examine their old party identities in light of their policy preferences’. This point, also made in relation to other televised debates (e.g. Carlin and McKinney, 1994; Benoit *et al.*, 2003; Coleman, 2000; Patterson, 2002), offers an interesting counterpoint to the chorus of criticism. It also highlights a shared intellectual space occupied by media commentators and an academic community interested in deliberative democracy. They have common concerns about the quality of policy justifications offered, and the manner in which participants engaged with each other.

By exploring that space in this article, we make two key contributions and speak to different audiences. First, a rigorous assessment of deliberative quality is useful for those studying leader debates and those concerned with the general democratic health of the UK’s electoral democracy. Second, by assessing the debates both in themselves and – crucially – within a

broader deliberative system, we speak to those interested in the institutionalization of deliberative democracy.

We begin by exploring the deliberative potential of debates in more detail – and noting the considerable constraints thereon. Then we introduce the Discourse Quality Index, the basis for our empirical analysis, and present our assessment of the deliberativeness of the 2010 leader debates. Although that assessment is mixed at best, we then argue that the debates may still have a role to play as part of a wider deliberative system, and pursue that line by comparing and contrasting those leader debates with House of Commons debates. We find that, while parliamentary debates exhibit a greater degree of engagement with counterarguments and a greater willingness to justify arguments with reference to the common good, the leaders' debates are clearly superior when it comes to compelling participants to justify their positions. We thus highlight the potential for different arenas to fulfil complementary deliberative functions, which in turn gives our conclusions a more optimistic note than had we assessed the debates in isolation.

### **Leaders' debates and deliberative democracy**

Early research in the deliberative paradigm was dominated by abstract debates regarding the nature of deliberation as a mode of communicative action. The turn of the century, however, bore witness to what Chambers (2003) terms the 'institutional turn' in deliberative democracy, as the focus increasingly shifted towards the problem of how to effectively *institutionalize* the central deliberative ideal of political justification. As Davidson and Stark (2011, p. 157) note: 'Most deliberative theorists would agree that there are mechanisms endogenous to the process of public deliberation which generate decisions that are better reasoned and informed; more public-orientated and consensual; and consequently more

legitimate and effective'. The question is: can leader debates be seen as one such mechanism?

Their potential in this regard is enhanced if they are seen as part of a wider deliberative system in which the notion of a continuum of deliberative potential is a foundational assumption (Chambers, 2009; Dryzek, 2010; Goodin, 2005; Hendriks, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012; Parkinson, 2006; Thompson, 2008). The idea of a deliberative system suggests that the norms of deliberative democracy emerge from an institutional tapestry rather than a single body or practice. A deliberative system constitutes 'a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole' (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012 p. 4-5). The concept is neither mechanistic nor bounded but we can identify some recurring categories within deliberative systems, each with multiple actors (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012, p. 12). Included here are 'empowered spaces' populated by elites where binding decisions are made. These spaces include parliaments, executives and government agencies; 'public spaces' where the unstructured and relatively unconstrained contestation of discourses occurs. These spaces include civil society associations, social movements, the media, the internet, public hearings, mini-publics and public conversation; and 'transmission mechanisms' that link empowered and public spaces together (Dryzek, 2009, p. 1385). Mansbridge (1999, p. 277) argues that there should be a continuum of deliberative standards across this spectrum of venues. While a shared discursive standard can hold across a deliberative system, it should be tightened or relaxed depending on the location of the deliberative act: 'stringent' versions of the standard should be applied where political obligations exist or legitimate authority exercises power, whereas 'less stringent' reporting exhibited in 'everyday talk' should be reserved for more informal settings. Similarly, Goodin, in his work on sequencing deliberation, argues that it is important to 'divide up the

deliberative task, assigning different portions to different agents, and holding them to different evaluative standards accordingly' (2005, p. 188). And for Bächtiger and Steenbergen (2004, p. 3), evaluations of an arena's deliberative potential have to be sensitive to political and institutional realities. A loss of normative purity is therefore inevitable:

When one is concerned with a more deliberative mode of policymaking in real world politics, it is fairly problematic to analytically imply the demanding presuppositions of the Habermasian discourse model ... Therefore to get hold of "deliberation" in the real world of politics, it may be necessary to switch to a "weaker" deliberative program ... [D]eliberation is best conceptualized as a continuum ranging from more to less deliberative ways of policy making and not as a categorical conception where true deliberation is either present or not.

Once we acknowledge that leader debates operate within a longer sequence, we need not expect them to pass every deliberative test with flying colours as their inevitable limitations can be offset by other components of that system. Rather, we must tailor our evaluative criteria and emphasise the particular deliberative norms that these debates are expected to meet. Our analysis will, therefore, draw on existing research on leaders' debates to assess the quality of discourse that we can realistically expect to see exhibited in such debates.

This brings us to the question of precisely what deliberative tasks the leaders' debates may reasonably be expected to fulfil within a wider deliberative system. In Hendriks's (2006) terms, they are an example of exclusive, elite-driven deliberation at the formal, 'micro' end of the spectrum of discursive 'moments' that may constitute a deliberative system. In this respect they are 'empowered spaces' with some similarity to parliamentary debates, which Goodin notes are primarily used by elites to publicise arguments. Neither parliamentary nor leader debates are venues in which we would expect to see preference transformation or even

much respect for the demands of an opponent (Goodin, 2005, p. 190). This is particularly true in the case of the UK, Westminster being notoriously an arena in which the adversarial norms of the UK political system are played out.

Equally, however, there are important differences between parliamentary and leader debates. The latter have much greater capacity to connect actors in different precincts of the polity. They have, in the terms of Hendriks (2006) and Parkinson (2006) respectively, a more significant 'mixed' or 'intermediate' dimension. That is because, being broadcast to millions of citizens, they link elite policy proposals directly to public opinion. Consequently, they have the capacity to promote transmission between 'empowered' and 'public' spaces. This is important: if an interconnected deliberative system is to be approximated, political elites must deliberate publicly and thereby contribute to opinion formation in the public sphere. Related, the leaders' debates also have a far more explicit association with, and closer proximity to, elections. This ensures that party leaders engaged in this forum will be more concerned with convincing voters of the merits of specific policy proposals than are those deliberating in parliamentary settings (and particularly committees), where the focus will inevitably be more on scrutinising the detail of draft legislation already mandated. This is not to deny that representatives deliberating in parliament will have one eye on the next election; it is more that those engaged in the leaders' debates will have *both* eyes on the prize.

This combination of similarities and differences motivates our comparison of leader debates and House of Commons debates. Comparing the leaders' debates with a forum that is similar in deliberative terms, but which differs in terms of the space it occupies within the broader *political* system, enables us to hone in on exactly what role the leaders' debates may be seen to fulfill, if any, within the *deliberative* system. Do leader debates make a contribution beyond that of their closest analogue, precisely because of the differences in function, timing and audience highlighted above? Answering this question requires a direct comparison,

allowing us to gauge what each of the two arenas may contribute in deliberative terms and whether and how they might be sequenced.

It follows from this, but is worth clarifying explicitly, that our aim is not to declare one of these two settings to be superior *per se*. Indeed, any such claims about the deliberative superiority of one institution are of limited on the systemic view whereby these institutions are complementary rather than competing. Rather, we look to provide a *contextualized* account of *relative* strengths and weaknesses across a range of deliberative criteria. In the next section, we describe those criteria by introducing our means of operationalizing deliberation, the Discourse Quality Index, and assess the likely deliberative contribution of leader debates against its specific indicators.

### **Leader debates and the Discourse Quality Index**

The Discourse Quality Index (DQI) is a theoretically-grounded measurement instrument that enables researchers to code and analyze quantitatively the deliberative nature of political speech acts (Steenbergen *et al.*, 2003; Steiner, *et al.*, 2004). It emerges principally from a Habermasian view of communicative rationality, in which reasoned exchange is presented as *the* means of encouraging preference change and consensus. More specifically, Habermas's (1996) 'ideal speech situation' acts as a major evaluative touchstone against which the DQI measures deliberative politics in action.

The DQI is built on seven ethical desiderata that collectively reflect mainstream idealizations of deliberation (Thompson, 2008, p. 507). These principles underpin a series of coding categories – see Appendix 1 – that allow speech acts to be assessed in terms of their deliberative character. Coding commences as soon as a protagonist makes a demand, defined



simply as ‘a proposal of some sort by an individual or a group on what decisions should or should not be made’ (Steiner, *et al.*, 2004 p.170). The breadth of this definition explains why it is valid to apply the DQI to discursive contexts beyond the parliamentary arenas to which it was first applied. The abstraction of Habermas’s abstract ideal speech situation ensures that the DQI categories have general applicability. As Steenbergen *et al.* (2003, p. 44) stress, ‘Wherever there is deliberation of some sort and there is a record, the DQI can be applied.’ Indeed, they cite televised debates between political candidates as one of the many applications to which the DQI might be put.

Considering the specific DQI categories, several of these shine a light on the extent to which the leaders’ debates may contribute to the health of a democratic system. References to the common good, social justice, respect for societal groups and respect for the discourse of fellow candidates all have the *potential* to portray party politics in a benevolent light. High scores in these categories may contribute to the public perception that the parties and leaders in question are actors interested in the larger democratic good, and who have the capacity to rise above adversarial party politics. Discourses of this nature might even go run against the grain of political disenchantment that leads to low turnouts and apathy towards electoral politics. Blais and Parrella (2008), for example, studied the effects of televised debates in the USA and Canada, and found that they tend to improve viewers’ evaluations of candidates. The authors hypothesize that ‘perhaps the capacity to argue and defend a view is an attribute voters expect to see from political leaders. In this light, a debate contributes a positive element to the discourse of a democratic election’ (Blais and Parrella, 2008, p. 460).

If this sounds a little Panglossian, perhaps a more balanced way of extrapolating from Goodin’s (2005) arguments is to anticipate that both the positive and negative discursive behaviours that he attributes to parliamentary debates will be amplified in the leaders’ debates, where the sole aim is to influence voters. Focussing on the positives for the moment,

high scores in several DQI categories can be interpreted as contributing to this aim. Providing sound justifications for policy positions, for example, is clearly relevant to attempts to sway public opinion around manifesto pledges. For example, a well-reasoned justification for a policy position may enable the electorate to better reflect on the value of that position, which should in turn enhance the quality of democratic decision making, as discussed in the introduction. Moreover, the clearer the rationale for a manifesto pledge pre-election, the sharper the line of accountability that can be drawn between promise and performance post-election. Hence we might expect to see high DQI scores in this category – a reading consistent with An and Pfau's (2004, p. 432) claim that, in comparison to other traditional modes of political communication, televised debates involve 'more reasoning, clearer statements and greater specificity on issues' and 'produce more precise, accurate discourse'.

Pincione and Tesón's (2006) theory of 'discourse failure', however, would lead us to believe that elites lack the rational incentives to communicate meaningfully with the electorate. Drawing on Anthony Downs' work, they argue that the electorate, cognizant of the fact that their vote will be non-decisive, are not incentivized to overcome the high costs associated with acquiring accurate and detailed political information and will therefore remain in a state of 'rational ignorance' (Pincione and Tesón, 2006, p. 15). This is not to say that citizens suspend judgment. But it does mean that, according to Pincione and Teson, rather than communicating sound but opaque arguments, it is in the interests of political elites to offer up 'vivid' theories of society 'that voters find easy to believe' but which are often 'false, distorted or misleading' (Pincione and Teson, 2006, p. 15; pp. 21-39). Levasseur and Dean's (1996) longitudinal study of leaders' debates would appear to verify this hypothesis empirically, as they found that participants are more successful when they offer less evidence. Similarly, Reinmann and Maurer's (2005, p. 784) research into the German leaders' debates

illustrates the popularity of ‘statements that are rather abstract ambiguous, or vague, formulating general goals in such a way that nearly everybody can agree’.

So, on the one hand, leaders’ debates are ideally placed to fulfil an educative role within the deliberative system, particularly in relation to elections, due to their capacity to reach an audience of millions. On the other hand, there is a real lack of consensus in the existing literature about how far they produce the type of *reasoned* debate required to ignite that educative process. The provision of reasons is *the* quality required to make a claim about deliberation’s educative capacity. It enables participants and audience alike to reflect on the premises underlying the policy positions on offer. A reasonable interim conclusion, then, is that there is sufficient deliberative *potential* associated with this dimension of discourse quality as to justify our interrogation of the debates along these lines.

Performance in categories that record respect to fellow protagonists and competing discourses are also hard to predict due to a contingent overlap between deliberative principle and electoral gain. Candidates may believe that they need to appear ‘Prime Ministerial’ and above cheap shots; or they may employ dissent and disrespect instrumentally in an attempt to highlight the differences between themselves and the other leaders. The strategic decision of whether to promote respect for an opponent’s views will be based upon a leader’s assessment of his or her public image prior to, and as it evolves throughout, the series of debates. Again, drawing on Goodin’s (2005, p. 191) comments in relation to parliamentary debates, we might expect to see respect towards counterargument; however, crucially, this respect is likely to take the form of recognition and engagement rather than support: ‘Insofar as counterarguments of their opponents threaten to undermine their own case, they respectfully register those arguments and attempt to refute them’.

Benoit's (2007, 2014) work on the 'functional theory' of political campaign discourse also has explanatory value here. He identifies three main types of discourse and subjects them to cost-benefit analyses in order to generate hypotheses regarding their likely usage. *Acclaims*, or proclamations made by candidates regarding their own strengths and accomplishments, will be used most according to the functional theory as there is no associated cost; *attacks* on opponents' character or record will be used less frequently than acclaims because they risk putting off some voters and may trigger accusations of excessive negativity; finally, *defenses* will be the least prevalent form of discourse for three main reasons: i) they threaten to sidetrack the defending candidate and draw them onto territory more favorable to their opponent; ii) they risk making candidates appear as though they are on the back-foot; and iii) they may simply invite further unwanted attention to potential weaknesses (Benoit, 2014, p. 13-19; Airne and Benoit, 2005, p. 344-346). In a recent work, Benoit (2014) subjects an impressive range of American presidential debates to content analysis and reports findings that confirm the predictions of functional theory (Benoit, 2014, p. 38).

Turning to the content of justifications, here it is easier to derive clear expectations from the existing literature. As Goodin (2005, p. 191-192) recognizes when discussing the type of discourse one would expect to see during an election campaign, voters' decisions have been shown to be motivated more by the national interest than by self-interest (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013, p. 370). This being the case, it is strategically expedient for political parties, and in our case the party leaders, to 'orientate their appeals' accordingly by making regular references to the common good (Goodin, 2005, p. 192). Likewise, appeals to group interests and respect for specific groups are also a likely feature of a leaders' debate because of the need to 'bridge' and 'bond' (Dryzek, 2010) with sectional interests in order to bring voters into a winning coalition. We also should be under no illusion that preference transformation – that essential ingredient for the deliberative democrat – would probably be perceived as

electoral suicide for a party leader tied to manifesto pledges. Thoughtfully ruminating on another leaders' argument; changing one's position as a consequence of better reasoning; attempting to provide a mediating third way in a spirit of accommodation – these are discursive strategies which could project weakness and indecision. Indeed, the findings of the DQI as applied by its original architects highlight this point by showing how adversarial democracies (such as the UK) score far lower on the constructive politics indicators than more consensual nations (Steiner *et al.*, 2004, p.112-113).

Bringing these factors together we conclude that the leaders' debates should be analysed in a way that is respectful all of all deliberative norms but places a greater level of expectation on the following criteria:

- The degree of sophistication employed in justifications for demands
- The respect given to counterarguments
- The extent to which protagonists' reason around notions of the common good

### **Analysis of the leaders' debates**

Before testing these expectations, some notes on methodology are necessary. A first important point is that we interpreted the nature of a demand in broad terms so that we could trigger the DQI coding as much as possible. A demand was recorded when a leader made a specific policy proposal, electoral pledge, defined their or their party's position on an issue or provided a rationale as to why a citizen should decide to vote for their party. We also began to code if a leader made a statement in which a demand was implicit. For example, when David Cameron tells the Prime Minister that the level of net migration in the UK is too high, we construed that as a demand for lower levels of migration. This inclusive approach meant that the only passages of text which were excluded from analytical treatment were those

involving the debate facilitator and audience members and those in which the protagonist made exchanges – often attacks on each other – which were unconnected to demands. As a consequence, over 94% of debate content was coded. This does not mean, however, that all speech acts coded were especially relevant to the DQI categories. Many speech acts contained demands but little else which could be considered relevant to our framework. Defining the percentage of DQI-relevant versus DQI-irrelevant content within these speech acts is beyond the scope of this paper. The key point is that very few speech acts were rejected *a priori* as irrelevant.

In total Coder 1 and Coder 2 [names removed for review purposes] coded 321 speech acts across the three 2010 debates, resulting in the creation of 2247 codes. As is standard practice, we subjected 20% (73) of speech acts to inter-coder reliability testing. Appendix 2 reports various measures summarizing the similarities of the two coders' judgments on the six DQI indicators used in this article. Following Steiner *et al.* (2004), we calculate: i) the percentage agreement – that is, the proportion of instances that the two coders gave exactly the same code. The overall percentage agreement of 93% (359 of the 386 codes) matches the high levels of reliability reported by Steiner *et al.* (2004), and the reliability levels are consistent across the sub-components of the DQI; ii) Cohen's kappa. All of the kappa statistics exceed 0.8, confirming that these very high levels of agreement are way above what would be expected by chance; iii) Spearman's rho, which shows that the rankings of both coders are very reliable (all over 0.75 and hence very strong). Together, the data in the table point to strong inter-coder reliability and thus underpin our findings.

The one departure we make from the scheme devised by Steiner *et al.* (2004) concerns the Participation category. Their DQI coding manual stipulates that an interruption is recorded only in instances where the original speaker verbally registers a complaint about it (Steiner, *et al.*, 2004, p.171). This is apposite for parliamentary debates, in which there are well known

procedures for directing complaints to a speaker, presiding officer or chair. In the leaders' debates, however, applying this criterion strictly resulted in the *prima facie* finding that no interruptions took place. In reality, of course, there were interruptions in the leaders' debates. But, since they were not explicitly commented on by participants, the 'interruptions' category was left empty.

Moving on to the treatment of the data, a decision is required about whether to treat the DQI categories separately or in combination. For any given speech act, for example, an aggregate score of fifteen is possible. We might therefore choose to use the average score per speech act as a yardstick with which to evaluate the performance of each leader. Similarly, we could judge the deliberative quality of the debates by generating a total DQI score and comparing this against the total possible score that could have been achieved. We choose not to aggregate the data in this manner. As Thompson has pointed out, previous empirical research in this field has been plagued with problems associated with definitions of deliberation that congeal normative criteria into a single evaluative whole (Thompson, 2008, p. 501). These preclude a more nuanced understanding of the various dimensions that may constitute different modes and degrees of deliberation (Bächtiger and Steenbergen, 2004, p. 12).

The results of our coding are reported in Table 1. Our analysis begins with a straightforward statement: by the yardsticks of the DQI, the debates were a poor approximation of the norms of deliberation. In the vanguard of our negative commentary is the measurement of constructive politics. As hypothesized above, one of the defining features of a deliberative process – a willingness to adjust preferences and demands in accordance with the force of better argument – was completely absent from these debates. Our respect categories also support our initial statement. There is a negligible degree of respect amongst the leaders for each other's demands and counterarguments. Indeed, 92% of the coding in this category records either no respect – where a protagonist denigrates the position of another – or a

neutral code, where the statements of others are simply not acknowledged. When the leaders discuss constitutional reform in the first debate, for example, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg summarizes the demands of the other two leaders in withering terms, describing them as ‘a betrayal’, ‘a con’ and as rhetoric that will remain unmatched in reality. Returning fire, Clegg’s own demands are claimed by David Cameron to emerge from a ‘holier than thou’ attitude, while then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s proposals are presented as little more than an electoral ‘ploy’. Such posturing does not score well on the DQI. Sandwiched between these exchanges, however, is a rare example of the demands of another being respected – an example of the now infamous ‘I agree with Nick’ narrative espoused by Gordon Brown: ‘There’s got to be a right of recall for people who are in a constituency and find their MPs corrupt and parliament doesn’t act. I agree with that. I think Nick also agrees with me’.

*(Table 1 about here)*

The story in relation to respect to counterarguments is similar. Across the 321 total speech acts we found only five counterarguments that were explicitly valued by an opposition leader. Instances of the ‘I agree with Nick’ statement are captured by this coding category. Rather than credit the deliberative nature of such a statement, however, the British media more often than not presented them as a sign of prime ministerial weakness and/or used them to signify the rising fortunes of the Liberal Democrats (see, for example, Freedland, 2010). This is perhaps why no further instances of valued counterarguments were coded until the third debate. In line with Benoit’s predictions about debaters’ reluctance to be forced onto the defensive, most counterarguments were either ignored completely (38%) or acknowledged before being degraded (46%).

When turning to those categories that examine the nature and sophistication of justifications employed in the debates, however, we see some chinks of light. While only 5% of demands



were justified with reference to the common good, when it comes to the level of justification used to advocate demands we observe a relatively high degree of sophistication. Roughly half (49%) of demands were underpinned by qualified or sophisticated justifications. Indeed, qualified justifications (33%) represent the modal category of this DQI variable. An example of a sophisticated justification can be seen in the second leaders' debate when Nick Clegg defends European Union membership by explicitly connecting it to the mitigation of international crime, combating the threat of climate change and the need for regulatory oversight of the banking industry.

Considering these dimensions together, our initial assessment is that the brand of discourse employed in the leaders' debates can best be characterized as weak and somewhat lopsided. To deliberate entails communicating *and* responding to reasoned arguments. What the DQI illustrates is that the debates were relatively deliberative in the first instance: they were a forum where reasons were provided for a policy stance in the majority of cases. When it comes to reciprocal aspect of deliberation – which involves acknowledging, responding to and respecting the arguments of others – the picture is less positive.

However, as we argued above, to dismiss entirely the deliberative contribution of leader debates on the basis of Table 1 would be to ignore the emergent strand of literature focused upon deliberative systems. We can better understand the potential role of debates within such a system by comparing them with alternative elite-driven, 'real world' arenas of deliberation. Thus we can pinpoint what, if anything, is distinctive in deliberative terms about the leaders' debates and the contribution that they might make. In an earlier section, we identified various differences between parliamentary and leaders' debates in terms of their location and function within the wider political system, and commented on the ways in which these differences may manifest themselves in divergent discursive behaviours. In the next section,

we put those suggestions to the empirical test by comparing our leader debates data with parallel measurements from Westminster debates.

### **Comparative analysis**

Our comparison is based on three Westminster debates already coded according to the DQI by Andre Bächtiger.<sup>1</sup> These three debates concerned the minimum wage (16 December 1997), Sunday trading laws (9 February 1994) and disability issues (26 February 1993) – thus providing at least some of the issue diversity that characterises the leader debates. Although these parliamentary sessions all predate by a long way the leader debates of 2010, there seems no obvious reason to suppose that the deliberative quality of House of Commons debate has changed appreciably in the interim. More potentially disruptive of comparison is the fact that two of these debates – the latter two – were on issues of relatively weak party discipline. Since this might be expected to encourage a less adversarial and hence more deliberative discussion, we should acknowledge that Westminster goes into our comparison with a small head-start.

The results of our analysis, with significance tests and appropriate measures of association for each comparison, are presented in Table 2. It is immediately evident that, in line with our expectations, neither setting is going to be praised by deliberative democrats for the level of constructive politics on display. The Commons debates contained twelve examples of alternative proposals: only 6% of those coded but enough for a statistically significant advantage over the leaders' debates. However, the absence of any mediating proposals, and the fact that positional politics dominates the discourse in each institution, means that this difference is relatively weak. This corroborates existing research suggesting that elites will

---

<sup>1</sup> For more details on these debates – including the reliability estimates that, as we have already noted, are comparable to our own – see Steiner *et al.* (2004, ch. 5). We are very grateful to Professor Bächtiger for supplying the coded data to us for our own analysis.

engage in constructive politics and preference change, but only in private (Chambers, 2003) and that evaluative criteria based upon notions of constructive politics and preference transformation do not offer a realistic means of audit at this end of the deliberative system (Goodin, 2005).

*(Table 2 about here)*

Turning to one of our privileged norms, we do, however, record a higher proportion of justifications for policy demands in the leaders' debates than in the Commons debates. This is a significant difference between the two institutions. The Commons debates contained more demands (43% compared to 24%) in which conclusions were *not* linked to premises in any way. From this we conclude that the leaders' debates, perhaps because of their high visibility, compel protagonists to provide *some degree* of justification for their policy proposals, and to a greater extent than in a legislative context. This runs counter to previous research in which it has been argued that legislature plenary sessions enjoy a comparative advantage over other deliberative fora when it comes to the promulgation of justifications that can assist the formation of citizen preferences (Landwehr and Holzinger, 2010, p. 397). One reason for that supposed advantage could be the greater leisure afforded to parliamentarians to provide the multiple justifications that qualify as 'sophisticated' in the DQI framework. The more clock-constrained debaters were often confined to making single points – hence the preponderance of 'qualified' justifications in that particular cell of Table 2. Treating the levels as ordered categories and using the full DQI measure, we record a relatively weak association (Kendall's tau-c = -0.10) in this category because the Westminster debates' clear disadvantage in terms of the number of unjustified claims is offset by their advantage in terms of sophisticated justifications. However, if we collapse the 'qualified' and 'sophisticated' categories – in effect, focusing only on quality rather than quantity of justification – then the advantage for the leader debates is more pronounced: tau-c strengthens to -0.19. We can conclude that the

leaders' debates are indeed an institution that promotes the use of justifications. However, where justifications *are* offered, the more indulgent context of the Westminster plenary is more likely to generate the multiple arguments that meet the DQI's gold standard.

Respect given to counterarguments is our next privileged criterion. Both institutions can be criticised for engendering, or at least not inhibiting, high levels of degrading argumentation. If we should expect to see, at the very least, a form of procedural respect to the counterarguments presented by others in elite deliberations then we must report a shared institutional weakness here. However, the election debates are significantly weaker than those in the Commons. Key to this is the leaders' tendency simply to ignore each other's counterarguments. In Westminster there is a greater tendency to acknowledge the counterarguments of others with neutral statements rather than ignoring them outright. Also, fewer counterarguments were explicitly valued during the leaders' debates, although both settings score poorly in this regard.

If we broaden out the analysis to consider the other respect codes the narrative remains similar. Neither forum impresses in terms of the respect given to groups to be helped and the demands of other policymakers (reflected in the high levels of neutral coding). And there is no significant difference between the discursive treatment of groups in either institution. However, it still appears that respect is a commodity that is traded more easily across the floor of the Commons than under the spotlights of the television studio. The respect for demands coding shows that policy proposals are less likely to be denigrated in the House of Commons, and the overall mean respect calculation shows a substantial and significant divide between the two institutions.

Looking to the content of justification, there were more references to the common good and fewer references to sectional interests in the Westminster debates. The former finding runs

counter to Goodin's (2005) expectations, as outlined above. Admittedly, the neutral categories are loaded again on both counts so we would stress that both types of debate are weak when it comes to this kind of policy advocacy. However, Westminster is stronger again in this comparison and the distinction is unambiguously significant, being based on meaningful differences in all coding categories.

We can present a more fine-grained examination of the common good here, based on the DQI architects' distinction between two principles or interpretations thereof. One code captures advocacy based around the utilitarian principle of the greatest good to the greatest number, whereas the difference interpretation is based on the Rawlsian notion that inequality is justified when it favours the disadvantaged. Our findings show that the House of Commons debates contained fewer references to the national interest, framed in utilitarian terms, and more references to helping disadvantaged groups as part of improving the common good. Here the difference between the subject matter being debated in each forum is important. While contemporary elections are fought around valence issues that reflect agreement across parties and leaders (after all, who doesn't want a strong economy?), Westminster debates tend to focus more on the minutiae of policy differences and the distributional effects of these differences in terms of constituencies. The former privileges reference to the national interest on a grand scale, whereas the latter encourages a narrower but more representative policy debate.

### **Putting the Debates in their Place**

We can now assess what the leaders' debates might bring to a deliberative system. First, we should restate that neither arena is particularly conducive to deliberation when viewed through the full prism of the DQI. The House of Commons debates, however, tend to be more

deliberative in two of the areas that constitute our distilled evaluative framework: the discourse exhibits more respect for reasoned counterarguments and a greater willingness to debate around notions of the common good. There is, however, a significant area in which the leaders' debates are clearly superior, which is that participants felt much more often compelled to justify their positions.

These findings are of obvious relevance to the potential educative impact of each setting. According to a post-debate poll reported by Blumler (2011, p. 39), 68% of respondents felt that they knew more 'about the policies of each party' following the debates, and 53% believed the debates had helped them to 'understand the problems which the country is facing'. In a focus group study, Watts (2002) reports voters praising the potential for debates to go deeper into issues, to communicate candidates' stances on a wider range of topics and give a sense of the integrity of leaders (Watts, 2002, p. 27). Turning from subjective to objective assessments of learning, several studies indicate that televised debates improve voters' knowledge of policy positions (Benoit *et al.*, 2003; Just *et al.*, 1990; Kraus, 2000; Patterson, 2002; Pfau *et al.*, 2001). Even if the parliamentary debates had enjoyed similar audiences, our comparison in terms of level of justification suggests that they would have a lesser educative effect. When we consider that parliamentary debates are viewed by only a minuscule fraction of the audience for televised leader debates (BBC 2012, p. 39), the point is reinforced. As a means of communicating reasoned defences of manifesto pledges, these debates represent a valuable educative component of the deliberative system.

We believe that the leaders debates can perform a significant role in this regard. For this reason we build upon Goodin's (2005) work on deliberative sequencing in order to elaborate an additional criterion by which the leaders' debates may be evaluated: the degree to which they encourage public debate and participation in other areas of the deliberative system. It is not possible to make such assessments directly using the DQI; however, again, prior research

gives grounds for optimism. Coleman (2011, p. 74) reports that 87% of respondents to a post-election survey claimed to have talked to other people after having watched or listened to the debates. The quality of this discourse is not known but it is worth reiterating Mansbridge's point that even 'everyday talk' can play an integral role in a deliberative system. Thelwall (2011) supplements these survey findings by using the Blogpulse tracking service to record social media reaction to the debates. Not only did the debates trigger the major spikes of activity during the election campaign – as indeed they did again in 2015 (Bainbridge, 2015) – but, more pertinently, Thelwall's (2011, p. 58-59) analysis also enables us to comment on the form this discourse takes: although fewer than 10% of bloggers engaged with arguments raised in the first debate, this increased to approximately 25% regarding the second debate and just short of 20% for the third. Hardly a victory for substance over style, but nonetheless evidence of leader debates stimulating more public engagement with policy issues than does more or less any other arena.

Parallel findings have been recorded in studies of leader debates elsewhere, emphasising their capacity to 'engage citizens in the political process' (Kraus 2000, p. 123). And survey research has shown that US leaders' debates 'widen the circle of conversation' around campaigns by stimulating greater amounts of discussion beyond traditional family units (Patterson 2002 p, 123). Furthermore, An and Pfau (2004) found that, despite the confrontational style of the debates, they still do not undermine participatory attitudes in the way that Mutz's (2002) arguments might imply. Indeed, compared to other less restrained forms of campaigning, debates tend to lead to more positive views about the democratic process amongst viewers than other campaign formats (Pfau *et al.*, 2001; though see Spiker and McKinney, 1999, for a counter-example). The evidence is mixed on whether debates can go so far as to increase voter turnout, especially amongst groups that lack interest in politics

(Cavanaugh, 1995; Faas and Maier, 2004). Nonetheless, the capacity of debates to generate engagement is clear.

Of most direct relevance here is the study by Cho and Choy that seeks to ascertain ‘the potential of televised debates to contribute to a deliberative democracy. In this view, televised debates facilitate the democratic process not only by directly providing voters with relevant information but also by encouraging voters to engage in communicative activities through which they reflect, both intrapersonally and interpersonally, upon politics and the campaign themselves’ (2011, p.779). Cho and Choy thus anticipate that leader debates can stimulate not just Goodin’s (2005) notion of ‘deliberation within’, discussed below, but also Mansbridge’s (1999) everyday talk. In short: ‘if televised debates stimulate subsequent news consumption and political conversation, it is also likely that they promote citizen deliberation and democracy’ (Cho and Choy 2011, p.779). Results from their study reveal that watching the debates leads to increased information-seeking about candidates and political discussions within social networks n

. The buzz generated by debates can also encourage citizens who did not see them to join the discussion too. Consequently, Cho and Choy (2011, p.794) conclude that leaders’ debates ‘contribute to democratic processes by offering a mediated context for collective deliberation involving elites and citizens’. This mediated context provides a bridge for discourses in a deliberative system, which connects empowered and public spaces together.

More indirectly, we can also examine how the specific nature of the discourse exhibited in the leaders’ debates may facilitate public debate and transmission. The relatively sophisticated level of justification employed by the leaders provides viewers with something substantive to grasp on to in deliberative terms. But there is more to linking elites and citizens than simply forwarding reasons for one’s position. As Elstub (2010) notes, a key element of the second



and third generations of deliberative democracy is recognition of the role that certain types of rhetoric may fulfil in connecting communicative arenas within a deliberative system (Chambers, 2009; Dryzek, 2010). Chambers especially believes that ‘deliberative rhetoric’ can play a vital role in encouraging thoughtfulness and debate ‘out there’ in the public spheres of the deliberative system. It encourages ‘thoughtfulness’ and ‘considered reflection about a future action’ on the part of those exposed to debate: ‘It ought to spark active reasoning and thoughtfulness rather than unreflective triggers or gut reactions’ (Chambers, 2009, p. 335). Crucial given our focus, moreover, is Chambers’s claim that such rhetoric can help foster a deliberative relationship between rhetorician and audience even when the listener cannot respond or hold the orator to account. Hence the insertion of an emotive statement alongside a policy rationale might be the very reason why a viewer pauses to reflect.

Prior studies of leaders’ debates go some way to supporting this view by confirming that viewers can be reached by rhetorical appeals if a leader employs the correct argumentative structure. In their analysis of viewer responses to the 2005 German Chancellor debate, for example, Nagel *et al.* (2012, p. 842) show that the viewing public respond negatively to ambivalence and that opinions about the use of evidence varied across leaders, but that emotional appeals consistently impress the viewing audience in positive ways. These findings allow Nagel and his co-authors to unfold an argument that verbal communication, defined as an argumentative strategy that combines issue, tone, evidence and rhetoric (Nagel *et al.*, 2012, p. 834-835), can be more important than visual and vocal elements when it comes to audience impression (Nagel *et al.*, 2012, p. 846). The key message for our research is that there is a connection between rhetorical flourish and citizen stimulus during a debate and that in terms of viewer positivity, rhetoric is more convincing than justifications via evidence. Building upon this is our deliberative system claim, which is that combining rhetoric with a meaningful

policy justification can turn viewer stimulus into viewer reflection and that this is a sign of deliberative rhetoric in action.

There are many examples, across all of the debates, in which rhetorical flourishes are accompanied by – and potentially draw attention to – qualified and sophisticated justifications.

Consider the following quotation:

Our tax system is grotesquely unfair. After 13 years of Labour, who would have believed that you would have now a tax system where a multimillionaire from the City of London, pays a lower rate of tax on their capital gains, that's income to you or me, than their cleaner does on their wages. After 13 years of Labour, we have the bottom 20% of people in this country who pay more in tax as a proportion of their income than the top 20%. I think we need to change that. David Cameron says you can't afford tax giveaways. No, you can't. What you can do is switch the tax system, make it fair. Make sure that those huge loopholes that only people right at the top, very wealthy people who can afford a football team of lawyers and accountants to get out of paying tax, close those loopholes, give the money back to people so that they pay no income tax on the first £10,000 that you earn. That's £700 back in the pocket of the vast majority of you in this country.

Clegg's sophisticated justification of tax reform, appealing to both the common good and the Rawlsian difference principle, provides the raw materials for public reflection. He also, however, uses rhetoric to draw attention to these reasoned arguments. There is an arresting pathos in the comparison of the multimillionaire and the cleaner and in the story of how the rich can afford a 'football team' of lawyers and accountants to avoid taxation, and the reference to capital gains tax as 'income to you or me' is an example of what Dryzek (2010) terms 'bonding rhetoric', as it is designed both to associate Clegg with the common voter and

to distance him from Cameron. If the argument of Nagel *et al.* (2012) is correct, then the frequent use of such deliberative rhetoric in these debates will have boosted their educative potential for communicating reason and enhancing reflection.

These findings can launch an analysis of how leaders' debates may be sequenced with other fora. In large-scale societies such as the UK, mass debates where all are conversationally present are an impossibility. This being the case, Goodin proposes that we rely more on facilitating 'deliberation within' – or people's 'empathic imaginings to put themselves in the place of the other' (Goodin, 2000 p. 81). Deliberation on this reading 'is less a matter of making people "conversationally present" and more a matter of making them "imaginatively present" in the minds of deliberators' (Goodin, 2000, p. 83).

The leaders' debates can assist this process, as they have the capacity to act as a catalyst for internal reflection within the electorate due to their ability to produce deliberative rhetoric. However, listening to a small number of elected elites will have a limited impact with respect to the diversity of groups made 'imaginatively present' to the debate viewers. To facilitate inclusivity of 'empathic imaginings' amongst the electorate we therefore suggest sequencing the leaders' debates with representative fora that enable a microcosm of the electorate to be conversationally present and to discuss the proposals and arguments forwarded during the debate. An appropriate candidate for this type of sequencing would be Deliberative Polls, events explicitly 'designed to show what the public *would* think about the issues, if it thought more earnestly and had more information about them' (Luskin *et al.*, 2002, p. 258). In such a scenario, a representative sample of voters would be surveyed to determine their opinions on the range of issues to be covered in the debate and/ or the candidates and their parties. They would then watch the leaders' debates before deliberating, and finally their views would be canvassed again in order to measure preference transformation. An alternative approach is to use deliberative polls to determine the questions for the televised debates (Ackerman and

Fishkin, 2004, p. 25). It is vital that these discussions are televised so that they are able to influence the internal reflective process of the wider population. Leaders' debates, when sequenced with deliberative polls, would then enable transmission from public to empowered space too, which is crucial to interconnecting the deliberative system.

Alternatively, the leaders' debates could then form a crucial component of Ackerman and Fishkin's (2004) vision of 'Deliberation Day'. This would take the form of a national holiday, held one week in advance of the election, in which all registered voters are invited to gather in local meeting places to discuss the merits of the various parties and candidates in a combination of small groups and plenary sessions. Crucially, Ackerman and Fishkin suggest that the day opens with citizens sitting together 'to watch a live television debate on the leading issues between the principal national candidates' (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2003, p. 13). The leaders' debates would fit neatly into this slot with Deliberation Day supplying 'a context within which citizens can expose the candidates' claims to disciplined scrutiny and further exploration' (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004, p. 42).

In turn, the fact that the party leaders would know that their televised debates were to be subject to in-depth public deliberation might well persuade those leaders to rely less on rhetoric and to offer more justifications for their policy positions (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004, p. 81). The prospect of Deliberation Day might even provide an incentive to improve the election campaign debate across the board: 'By placing the D Day near the end of the campaign, we hope to reshape everything that goes before' (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004, p.87). Casting this broader argument in the specific terms of this article, we would argue that such deliberative sequencing has the potential not only to expand the 'empathic imaginings' of participants and television audiences but also to alleviate the problem of 'discourse failure' (Pincione and Téson, 2006). Evidence from mini-publics already demonstrates that, when citizens deliberate together, their preferences tend to become better informed, with cognitive

errors being corrected (Fishkin, 2009). As a consequence elites would have an incentive to alter their approach to the debates: ‘They would no longer automatically suppose that candidates were best sold in eight-second soundbites. Throughout the campaign, their eyes would be fixed firmly on the fact that their messages would be subjected to a day-long dissection – and that millions of votes might swing as a result’ (Ackerman and Fishkin 2003, p. 24).

## **Conclusion**

Our first conclusion is that the quality of discourse on display in the leaders’ debates falls well short of mainstream idealizations of democratic deliberation. This is very much in line with expectation. We must therefore agree with Cho and Choy (2011, p.792) that ‘it would be overly idealistic to claim that televised debates are political dialogue in which candidates deliberate about issues of national concern’. We also agree that there is though, more to these debates than the studio-based discourse.

When we rehouse our analysis within the context of creating a deliberative system, recalibrate our evaluative standards accordingly, and engage in comparative analysis with Westminster debates, the functional value of the leaders’ debates is unveiled. The leaders’ debates achieve elevated scores when it comes to compelling participants to employ reasoned justifications for their policy positions. Consequently our second conclusion is that the debates have a valuable role to play in a deliberative system, as they enable the mass communication of reasoned justifications and defenses of policy pledges to the public sphere during election campaigns. They can take the justifications for political action and transmit them from empowered official venues to public spaces. As such, they have the capacity to

promote informed public reflection and thereby enhance the quality of decision making at the ballot box.

Two strands of research will be required in order to develop this initial claim. The first is to exploit the comparative potential in this analysis. The DQI can and should be applied to future elections, not only in Britain but elsewhere. In particular, we would like to test the consistency of our finding about the propensity of these debates to produce relatively high levels of justification. Through this further empirical research, we can begin to generalise about leaders' debates as an institution through more nuanced analysis of the effects that individuals, issues and debate sequencing can have on aggregated DQI categories.

Second, more research is required to test our claim that it is the educative capacity of leaders' debate that secures their relevance within a deliberative system. There is the usual trade-off between internal and external validity in designing such research. Experimental designs, in which subjects are randomly assigned among debate and control conditions, score highly on the former. However, we still need to track the effects of such exposure across time and there remains the risk of a Hawthorne effect whereby the failure to recreate the everyday reality of debate exposure means that we overstate effect sizes (see Jerit *et al.*, 2013). Meanwhile, election study panel data, increasingly accessible given the low cost of the internet survey mode, offer some traction for testing whether debate exposure facilitates greater levels of individual reflection about policy positions during a campaign period and, more importantly, whether that exposure acts as a stimulus for forms of 'everyday talk' about campaign promises. Yet survey self-reports are a clumsy measure of the key dependent variables and concerns about endogeneity – with only those ready to get more engaged likely to watch debates attentively – are hard to shake off. As usual, it is through a combination of these different methods that progress is most likely to be made.

Finally, we argue that specific empirical arguments, which engage with the details of sequencing in particular political contexts, are now required if deliberative systems are to emerge. In doing so, specific relational analyses can also allow us to examine the validity of the systemic concept itself as it plays out across different institutional configurations. We have argued in this paper that the educative capacity of leaders' debates can be further enhanced by sequencing them with deliberative polls or deliberation days. We believe two benefits can accrue from this. First, it will enhance what Goodin calls 'deliberation within', by expanding the 'empathic imaginings' of those who are not 'conversationally present' (Goodin, 2000, p. 81-83). Second, carefully planned and carefully sampled mini-publics can provide balance to the more organic and unregulated components of a deliberative system. These components may have the capacity to generate much in the way of everyday talk and deliberation within but that does not necessarily guarantee a proper consideration of all sides of an argument. This is where the well-crafted mini-public can play a significant role in conjunction with leaders' debates.

Our analysis indicates that there is mileage in the systemic concept in the UK context. It has allowed us to make the case that sequencing the leaders' debates with representative deliberative fora in which a microcosm of the electorate is 'conversationally present' would serve to expand and diversify the internal reflections of the British electorate and to stimulate further public deliberation. We conclude, therefore, that the leaders' debates could become the centrepiece of a reinvigorated deliberative system during UK elections.

**Word Count: 11,994**

**Date: 11/12/15**

## References

Ackerman, B. and Fishkin, J.S. (2003) *Deliberation Day*. In: J.S. Fishkin and P. Laslett (eds.) *Debating Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 7-30.

Ackerman, B. and Fishkin, J.S. (2004) *Deliberation Day*. London: Yale University Press.

Ackerman, B. and Fishkin J.S. (2010, April 29) Why the Lib Dems do well out of TV debates. *The Guardian*, 29 April,  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/29/lib-dems-tv-debate-poll-surge>

Airne, D. and Benoit, W.L. (2005) 2004 Illinois U.S. Senate debates: Keyes versus Obama. *American Behavioral Scientist* 49(2): 343-352.

An, C. and Pfau, M. (2004) The efficacy of inoculation in televised political debates, *Journal of Communication* 54(3): 421-436.

Auer, J.J. (1962) The counterfeit debates. In: S. Kraus (ed.) *The Great Debates: Background, Perspective, Effects*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 142-150.

Bächtiger, A and Steenbergen, M.R. (2004) The real world of deliberation: a comparative study of its favorable conditions in legislatures. *EUI Working Paper*, SPS 2004/17.

Bainbridge, J. (2015) Economy, health and immigration top talking points for UK electorate. Research Live, News, 6 May, <http://www.research-live.com/news/economy-health-and-immigration-top-talking-points-for-uk-electorate/4013282.article>



Benoit, W.L. (2001) The functional approach to presidential television spots: acclaiming, attacking, defending 1952-2000. *Communication Studies* 52(2): 109-126.

Benoit, W. L. (2007) *Communication in Political Campaigns*. New York: Peter Lang.

Benoit, W.L. (2014) *Political Election Debates: Informing Voters about Policy and Character*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Benoit W.L., Hansen, G.L. and Verser, R.M. (2003) A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates. *Communication Monographs* 70(4): 335-350.

Bitzer, L., & Rueter, T. (1980) *Carter vs. Ford: The Counterfeit Debates of 1976*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Blais, A. and Perrella, A.M.L (2008) Systemic effects of televised candidates' debates. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(4): 451-464.

Blumler, J.G. (2011) Voters' responses to the prime ministerial debates: A rock of (future) ages?'. In: S. Coleman (ed.) *Leaders in the Living Room: The Prime Ministerial Debates of 2010*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, pp. 37-54.

BBC (2012) *Annual Report Part 2: The BBC Executive's Review and Assessment*, [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/bbc\\_executive\\_2011\\_12.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/bbc_executive_2011_12.pdf)

Carlin, D.B., & McKinney, M.S. (1994) *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Cavanaugh, J. W. (1995) *Media Effects on Voters: A Panel Study of the 1992 Presidential Election*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Chadwick, A. (2011) Britain's first live televised party leaders' debate: from the news cycle to the political information cycle. *Parliamentary Affairs* 64(1), 24-44.

Chambers, S. (2003) Deliberative democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science* 6: 307-26.

Chambers, S. (2009) Rhetoric and the public sphere: has deliberative democracy abandoned mass democracy?'. *Political Theory* 37(3): 323-350.

Cho, J. & Choy, S.P. (2011) From podium to living room: elite debates as an emotional catalyst for citizen communicative engagements. *Communication Research* 38(6): 778-804.

Coleman, S. (2000) Meaningful political debate in the age of the soundbite. In: S. Coleman (ed.) *Televised Election Debates: International Perspectives*. New York: St. Martin's, pp. 1-24.

Coleman, S. (2011) 'Evaluating the debates – 2010 and beyond'. In: S. Coleman (ed.) *Leaders in the Living Room: The Prime Ministerial Debates of 2010*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, pp. 67-78.

Davidson, S. & Stark, A. (2011) Institutionalising public deliberation: insights from the Scottish Parliament. *British Politics* 6: 155-186.

Dryzek, J.S. (2009) Democratization as deliberative capacity building. *Comparative Political Studies* 42(11): 1379-1402.

Dryzek, J.S. (2010) Rhetoric in democracy: a systemic appreciation. *Political Theory* 38(3): 319-339.

Elstub, S. (2010) The third generation of deliberative democracy. *Political Studies Review* 8(3): 291-307.

Faas, T. and Maier, J. (2004) Chancellor-candidates in the 2002 televised debates. *German politics* 13(2): 300-316.

Fishkin, J.S. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freedland, J. (2010,) Leaders' TV debate: 'I agree with Nick' was the night's real catchphrase. *The Guardian*, 16 April,  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/16/leaders-tv-debates-jonathan-freedland%20>.

Goodin, R.E. (2000) Democratic deliberation within. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29(1): 81-109.

Goodin, R.E. (2005) Sequencing deliberative moments. *Acta Politica* 40: 182-196.

Habermas, J. (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hendriks, C.M. (2006) Integrated deliberation: reconciling society's dual role in deliberative democracy. *Political Studies* 54(3): 486-508.

Holbrook, T. M. (1999) 'Political learning from presidential debates'. *Political Behavior* 21(1): 67-89.

Jerit, J., Barabas, J. and Clifford, S. (2013) Comparing contemporaneous laboratory and field experiments on media effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 77(1): 256-282.

Just, M., Crigler, A. and Wallach, L. (1990) Thirty seconds or thirty minutes: what viewers learn from spot advertisements and candidate debates. *Journal of Communication* 40(3): 120-133.

Kraus, S. (2000) *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Earlbaum.

Levasseur, D. and Dean K.W. (1996) The use of evidence in presidential debates: a study of evidence levels and types from 1960 to 1988. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 32(3): 129-142.

Landwehr, C. and Holzinger, K. (2010) Institutional determinants of deliberative interaction. *European Political Science Review* 2(3): 373-400.

Lanoue, D.J. and Schrott, P.R. (1991) *The Joint Press Conference: The History, Impact and Prospects of American Presidential Debates*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Lewis-Beck, M.S., and Stegmaier, M. (2013) The VP-function revisited: a survey of the literature on vote and popularity functions after over 40 years. *Public Choice* 157(3): 367-385.

Loughborough University Communication Research Centre (2015) Media coverage of the 2015 campaign (Report 4), <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/general-election/media-coverage-of-the-2015-campaign-report-4/>

Luskin, R.C., Fishkin, J.S. and Jowell, R. (2002) Considered opinions: deliberative polling in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science* 32(3): 455-487.

Macintyre, B. (2010) No killer blow but a victory for the voter. *The Times*, 16 April.

Mansbridge, J. (1999) Everyday talk in the deliberative system. In: S. Macedo (ed.) *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 211-239.

Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Christiano, T., Fung, A., Parkinson, J., Thompson, D. and Warren, M.E. (2012) A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In: J. Parkinson

and J. Mansbridge (eds.) *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-26.

Marqusee, M. (2010) This is managed democracy. *The Guardian*, 17 April, <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2010/apr/17/general-election-2010-leaders-debates>

Mutz, D.C. (2002) Cross-cutting social networks: testing democratic theory in practice. *American Political Science Review* 96(1): 111–26.

Nagel, F., Maurer, M. and Reinemann, C. (2012) Is there a visual dominance in political communication? How verbal, visual, and vocal communication shape viewers' impressions of political candidates. *Journal of Communication* 62(5): 833-850.

Parkinson, J. (2006) *Deliberating in the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Patterson, T.E. (2002) *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Pattie, C and Johnston, R. (2011) A tale of sound and fury, signifying something? The impact of the leaders' debates in the 2010 UK General Election, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 21(2): 147–177.

Pfau, M., Cho, J. and Chong, K. (2001) Communication forms in U.S. presidential campaigns: influences on candidate perceptions and the democratic process. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6(4): 88-105.

Pincione, G. and Tésou, F.R. (2006) *Rational Choice and Democratic Deliberation: A Theory of Discourse Failure*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Reinemann, C. and Maurer, M. (2005) Unifying or polarizing? Short-term effects and postdebate consequences of different rhetorical strategies in televised debates', *Journal of Communication* 55(4): 775-794.

Shephard, M. and Johns, R. (2012) A face for radio? How viewers and listeners reacted differently to the third leaders' debate in 2010. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14(1): 1-18.

Spiker, J.A. and McKinney, M.S. (1999) Measuring political malaise in the 1996 presidential election. In: L.L. Kaid and D.G. Bystrom (eds.) *The Electronic Election: Perspectives on the 1996 Campaign Communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, pp.319-334.

Steiner, J., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M. and Steenbergen, M.R. (2004) *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steenbergen, M.R., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M. and Steiner, J. (2003) 'Measuring political deliberation: a discourse quality index', *Comparative European Politics* 1: 21-48.

Thelwall, M. (2011) Debates in the blogosphere. In: S. Coleman (Ed.), *Leaders in the Living Room: The Prime Ministerial Debates of 2010*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, pp. 55-65.

Thompson, D.F. (2008) Deliberative democratic theory and empirical political science. *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 497-520.

Watt, N. (2010) Leaders' debates clouded election campaign – Gordon Brown. *The Guardian*, 5 May, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/may/05/leaders-debates-clouded-election-campaign-gordon-brown>

Watts, M. (2002) Watching debates: a focus group analysis of voters, *Campaigns and Elections* 44: 27-32.

Waweru, D (2010) Nick Clegg was unimpressive debater. *The Guardian*, 16 April, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/16/nick-clegg-lib-dem-debater>



*Appendix 1: DQI Principles and Codes*

<b>The Deliberative Principle</b>	<b>Corresponding DQI Code</b>
<i>There should be open participation in the dialogue</i>	<p><u>Participation (P)</u> measures the ability of participants to debate without interference from other contributors. These codes record the frequency of interruptions that draw complaints from protagonists.</p> <p>Code 0 : interruption of speaker</p> <p>Code 1 : normal participation of speaker</p>
<i>Assertions should be introduced and assessed through reason</i>	<p><u>Level of Justification (LJ)</u> assesses the link between the justification for a demand and the demand itself. Where there is no link between a demand and a justification this would be coded as ‘inferior’. Where there is a clear link between a demand and the premise that justifies it this would be coded as ‘qualified’. Where two or more qualified justifications are provided this would be considered ‘sophisticated’.</p> <p>Code 0 : no justification</p> <p>Code 1 : inferior justification</p> <p>Code 2 : qualified justification</p> <p>Code 3 : sophisticated justification</p>
<i>Participants should consider the common good</i>	<p><u>Content of Justification (CJ)</u> ascertains whether or not a demand is justified in terms of sectoral interests or the common good. The latter are then split into those that frame the common good in terms of assisting the most disadvantaged (Rawlsian) or in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarian).</p> <p>Code 0: explicit statement concerning group or constituency interests</p> <p>Code 1: neutral statement</p> <p>Code 2a: explicit statement of the common good (utilitarian)</p> <p>Code 2b: explicit statement of common good (Rawlsian)</p>
<i>Respect should be shown for social groups</i>	<p><u>Respect for Groups (RTG)</u> measures the empathy that participants have for specific sections of society.</p> <p>Code 0 : no respect</p> <p>Code 1 : neutral</p> <p>Code 2 : explicit respect</p>
<i>The demands of other participants should be respected</i>	<p><u>Respect for Demands (RDO)</u> measures the instances of a protagonist being positive or negative about the demands being discussed.</p> <p>Code 0 : no respect</p> <p>Code 1 : neutral</p>

	Code 2: explicit respect
<i>The opposing arguments of other participants should be respected</i>	<u>Respect towards Counterarguments (RTC)</u> evaluates reactions to counterarguments. Code 0 : counterarguments are ignored Code 1 : counterarguments are acknowledged but explicitly degraded Code 2: counterarguments are acknowledged but the response is neutral Code 3: counterarguments are acknowledged and at least one is explicitly valued
<i>Participants should strive towards compromise solutions and preference transformation</i>	<u>Constructive Politics (CP)</u> examines the extent to which participants are prepared to reach compromise through changing their position on a demand. Positional politics means that no attempt is made. A mediating proposal acknowledges contrary viewpoints and proposes an alternative on which protagonists might agree. An alternative proposal is a mediating proposal that is not relevant to that specific demand yet might be of relevance to other areas of the debate. Code 0 : positional politics Code 1 : alternative proposal Code 2: mediating proposal

*Appendix 2. Inter-coder reliability tests for a sample of the leader debates data*

	% agreement	Cohen's $\kappa$	Spearman's $\rho$	<i>N of codes</i>
Level of justification	86	0.81	0.88	73
Content of justification	99	0.96	--	73
Respect to groups	96	0.81	0.82	72
Respect to demands	90	0.83	0.77	70
Respect to counterarguments	87	0.81	0.88	43
Constructive politics	98	0.97	--	55
Overall	93			386

Table 1: DQI Scores for the 2010 U.K. Leaders Debates

Criterion	% Coded		Criterion	% Coded
<b>Constructive Politics</b>			<b>Respect towards Groups</b>	
Positional Politics	100		None	3
Alternative	0		Neutral	86
Mediating	0		Explicit	12
<b>Level of Justification</b>			<b>Respect towards Demands</b>	
None	23		None	41
Inferior	28		Neutral	51
Qualified	33		Explicit	8
Sophisticated	16			
<b>Content of Justification</b>			<b>Respect to Counterarguments</b>	
Constituency/Group	26		Ignored	19
Neutral	69		Degraded	23
Common Good	5		Neutral	7
			Valued	2
			No Counter on Table	49

Table 2: House of Commons and Leaders' Debates Compared

	Leaders' Debates %	House of Commons %	Significance	DQI 'Winner'	Strength
<i>Constructive politics</i>					
Positional politics	100.0	94.0	$\chi^2=14.2$ , p<.001	Westminster > Leaders	Weak (tau-c=.06)
Alternative proposal	0	6.0			
Mediating	0	0			
<i>Level of justification</i>					
None	23.4	43.2	$\chi^2=58.3$ , p<.001	Leaders > Westminster	Weak (tau-c = -.10)
Inferior	28.0	18.9			
Qualified	33.0	9.7			
Sophisticated	15.6	28.2			
<i>Content of Justification</i>					
Constituency/Group Interests	26.2	3.4	$\chi^2=81.8$ , p<.001	Westminster > Leaders	Medium/Strong (C = 0.37)
Neutral	68.5	81.1			
Common Good (Utilitarian)	5.0	2.4			
Common Good (Difference)	0.3	13.1			
<i>Respect to Groups</i>					
None	2.5	1.5	$\chi^2=2.1$ , n.s	Leaders > Westminster	Weak (tau-c = -.10)
Neutral	85.6	89.8			
Explicit	11.9	8.7			
<i>Respect to Demands</i>					
None	41.3	12.1	$\chi^2=53.8$ , p<.001	Westminster > Leaders	Medium (tau - c = 0.25)
Neutral	50.5	80.6			
Explicit	8.3	7.3			
<i>Respect to Counterarguments</i>					
Ignored	37.8	18.9	$\chi^2=23.1$ , p<.001	Westminster > Leaders	Medium (C=.24, tau-c = 0.27)
Included but degraded	45.7	46.6			
Included but neutral	13.4	27.7			
Included and valued	3.0	6.8			
<i>Overall respect (mean)</i>	2.08	2.66	t=5.28, p<.001	Westminster > Leaders	Medium/Strong (ES = .55)

